

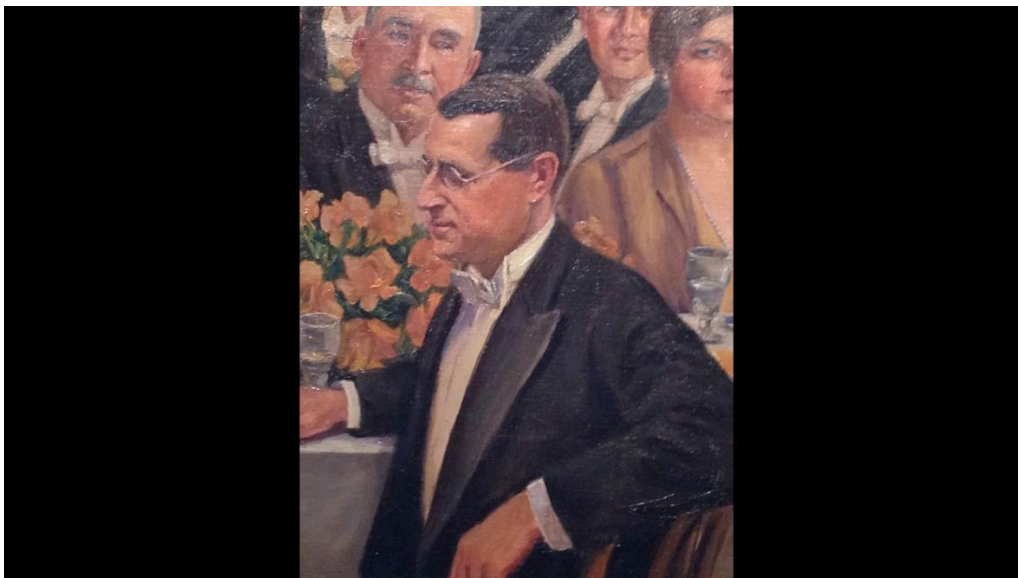
This (Israel) Looks Like That (Me) Romans 11:25-32

November 24, 2019
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A few years ago, a member of our church shared something with me from a trip they had made to the Ford museum in Detroit. He said they were walking through the museum looking at things and they saw a large painting that intrigued them (see below).



It is a painting from 1929 of an event where American industrial leaders honored Thomas Edison for the 50th anniversary of inventing the incandescent light bulb. This member told me that they went up close and started looking at the people who attended this event, when all of a sudden, they were shocked to see this (see below):



Was I there in 1929? Well, actually, there are a few things about me you may not know, but I can't get into them right now. Apparently, there was someone who looked a lot like me that attended that gala.

How many of us have gone up to someone and robustly greeted them only to realize that they aren't who we thought they were? Embarrassing!

Some people and some things look a lot like other things. We might say it this way, *this looks like that*. This cloud shape looks like an elephant. This potato chip looks like Abraham Lincoln. My girls see resemblances all the time with most things looking like a horsey, dog, or unicorn. *This looks like that*.

I want you to keep the phrase "this looks like that" in mind as we materially finish today Romans' explanation of how Israel fits into God's redemptive plan. The Jewish people are privileged for incredible gifts God gave them in the story. They have spiritually stumbled over Jesus as Messiah. But God isn't done with them yet. He concludes with the big story of Israel and their future. Someday the Jews will return to God by faith in Jesus in such huge numbers that he says here, *all Israel will be saved*. Here's the text:

"Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob'; 'and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.' As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (Romans 11:25-32 ESV).

Paul is telling the story of ethnic Israel and all her hard-heartedness to the gospel. He is also telling the story of a God so absolutely committed to the glory of his mercy that he ordained even the story of rebellious Israel as a story of magnificent mercy. As we see Israel's story and testimony, Christian, I want you to be thinking, their story looks and sounds like my story. This story of Israel is like that story of God's mercy in my life. We will get there, but let's get into the text.

"Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:25).

Paul is still concerned that the Gentile Christians would be arrogant or "*wise in [their] own sight*." How so? By thinking that they have replaced Israel at the center of God's love, like an only child feels entitled to all the parents' love. What happens when the second child comes? The first child tends to not be happy about that. I'm the oldest of four and I still tell my parents I think they had three too many.

If we misunderstand God's plan as Gentile believers, we could easily have only-child syndrome. But no, he says in verse 25 that this is a mystery. "Mystery" in the Bible means something different from how we use it in English. We say "mystery" and we mean something that we don't understand. "Mystery" in the New Testament is something that once was unknown but now has been made known. Paul says, "*he made known to us the*

mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ" (Ephesians 1:9 NIV).

Biblical mystery is the unknown made known. In Romans 11:25 the mystery now made known is God's plan for the Israelites—past, present, and future. The past he describes in Romans 9:1ff as the patriarchs, the covenants, the Shekinah glory, the law, and the promises.

But now a "partial hardening" has come upon Israel. What is that? It is this present era of spiritual hardening; spiritual blindness. It began with the national confusion over Jesus and the across-the-board rejection of the gospel in the first-century synagogues. It continues to this day where Yeshua is not honored as God and Messiah among practicing Jews. Praise God for many exceptions. If you hear of Messianic Jews, these are Jews that do recognize Jesus as the Jewish Messiah of God and believe. There are congregations of Messianic Jews all over the world. Praise God for evangelistic efforts among the Jews including our church members Wes and Lori Taber and their long-term ministry with *Life in Messiah*.

But taken as a whole, the last 2,000 years of Jewish history has been a long slog of spiritual hardness. Why? Two reasons.

Two Reasons for Jewish Spiritual Hardness

To allow the full number of Gentiles to be saved

"I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." (Romans 11:25)

While Israel is spiritually asleep, the gospel among non-Jews/Gentiles is thriving. Even to this day the gospel is thriving all over the world. I read some stats recently that are shocking and wonderful:

- In Asia, Christianity has grown from 28 million Christians in 1910 to 285 million in 2010.¹
- In the Americas—particularly Latin America—Christianity has grown from 166 million Christians in 1910 to more than 800 million in 2010.²
- In Africa, Christianity has grown from 9 million believers in 1910 to more than 516 million in 2010.³ On average, there are around 33,000 conversions or people being born into Christian families every single day in Africa.⁴

Gentiles are streaming in. See also that "*until the fullness of the Gentiles*" or "*full number*" as some translations go with, insinuates a fixed number. Dare we say a pre-decided number? Could I use this word? A predestined number? If Romans 8 and 9's teaching on election was new to you, my experience is that once you see the truth there, you start seeing the truth all over in Scripture and here is one.

¹ "World Distribution of Christian Population in 1910 and 2010," www.pewforum.org, December 19, 2011.

² Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," www.pewforum.org, December 19, 2011.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Krish Kandiah, "The Church is Growing, and Here are the Figures That Prove It," www.ChristianToday.com, March 5, 2015.

The era of Israel's hardness is simultaneously the era of non-Jew receptivity to the gospel. But this will not always be Israel's plight. Paul picks up his prophetic pen and prophecies about Israel's future in verse 26,

"And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob'; 'and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.' As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:26).

All Israel will be saved? How is this possible? They have been hard toward Jesus for so long. Paul says there is coming a day, coinciding with the full number of elect Gentiles being saved, where Israel is going to have a massive revival. So much so that he says, *All Israel will be saved*. This is sharply debated. Which Israel is he talking about? Ethnic Jews? Believing Jews? Or is this the church?

The evidence points to the same Israel described in verse 25 as hardened Israel. That is not the church, but ethnic Jews. Further he says, *all Israel will be saved*. Every single one who has ever lived? Everyone alive at that time? Here's what we can say: while not requiring every single one alive at the time in the future, so many living at that time will be saved that it will be a corporate, national revival. This will happen just prior to Jesus' second coming.

We see here that God still loves Israel. He makes that plain in verses 28-29. God chose them and that election remains because God's calling is *"irrevocable."*

Jennifer and I have a trust fund for our girls that is called a revocable trust. My understanding is that this means we can make changes and fiddle with it as time goes. It's legal, but alterable. If we die, it become irrevocable because we are no longer around to change it.

God's purposes in salvation are *not* revocable; he's *not* still fiddling with the plan. They are irrevocable. They cannot change because God is sovereign, and he is *"[working] out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will"* (Ephesians 1:9 NIV).

God told Abraham his plan for him and all his descendants millennia ago in Genesis 12. Think of all the generations and people and drama and ebbs and flows of all of history. Yet through it all, God's purpose is unchangeable, unassailable, irrevocable. That's true for the calling and election of Israel and true for his calling and election of you, dear Christian. Nothing can ever change God's purpose to save you forever and ever, amen. We may have a few here struggling with the idea of election, but we all like irrevocable salvation.

If God purposed Israel's calling as a chosen people AND purposed Israel's hard hearts toward Jesus AND this has gone on for 2,000 years with who knows how many years yet to go, we should ask, why? Why would God choose this plan?

Israel: an eternal monument to God's magnificent mercy

"For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy" (Romans 11:30).

"For just as you." Who? Gentile Christians. "Just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy." What is God saying? *This looks like that.* The Jews' salvation looks just like Gentile salvation. How? The starting point is the same. Disobedience. "You were at one time disobedient to God." This is everyone's pre-salvation status before God. We all were sinners. We all were disobedient to God's law and desires. We are sinners by nature and by choice.

So, when we look at the general Jewish population scoffing at the claims of Christ, it's like looking in a mirror at our pre-Christian selves. Perhaps not as hostile, but none of us were born righteous no matter how good your Christian parents may have been.

"So, they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy." (Romans 11:31)

How were we saved out of our spiritual hardness? "By the mercy shown to you." Mercy. Grace is God giving us what we don't deserve. Mercy is God *not* giving us what we *do* deserve. Both get at the same truth that sinners don't deserve forgiveness from God; we deserve wrath and judgment and hell. Gentile Christians have received this mercy by the millions upon millions. It is the same mercy God gives Gentile Christians that will some day be given to the Jews.

Again, why? Why do it this way, God?

"For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all." (Romans 11:32).

God's purpose in the salvation of the Jews and the Gentiles is the same and is the purpose behind why he does everything that he does. Namely, the glory of God. I can't wait to get to Romans 11:36, but look a few verses ahead for the textual support, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." This is the best summary perhaps in the entire Bible of God's ultimate purpose in all that he does. "To him be glory."

So how does this apply to Jewish salvation and Gentile salvation? "God has consigned all to disobedience" (Romans 11:32). The Greek Word for "consigned" means *to hem in, to cause something to happen by restricting it.* You fisherman will like this—the word is used for catching a fish—not by line and hook, but by net. God has netted all humanity in the constriction of sin. This is no accident. God purposed Adam and Eve's sin even while they were personally responsible. He ordained your sin and status as sinner before him. We all are in the same net. All consigned to disobedience. Why God? It's not our preference. Not our plan. Why God?

"That he may have mercy on all." (Romans 11:32)

Imagine with me for a moment that in heaven someday everyone there was saved by God's mercy except one. There's one person there who got there by their own moral effort. Just one. Millions of others got there by grace, but one was able to make it on their own. How does that change the value of God's mercy?

It shatters it. If just one is there by personal merit, God's mercy becomes *a* way to be saved, not *the only* way. Valuable for sure, but not in an ultimate sense. We'd likely make a great hero out of the one. He'd be elected every year as president of the HOA. We'd put him

on a pedestal. He'd be a big deal in heaven (or she, more likely a she). If there was just one.

But what if rather than *one* there is *none*? Not one single person in all of the new heaven and new earth is there by their own merit or effort. Now who do we worship? There's only one. God. What do we worship him for? Undeservable, unearnable, irrevocable mercy.

J.C. Ryle wrote this in 1867, "[*The Jews*] are reserved and preserved, in order that God may show in them as on a platform, to angels and men, how greatly he hates sin, and yet how greatly he can forgive, and how greatly he can convert. Never will that be realized as it will in that day when "all Israel shall be saved."⁵

What people group is more famous in all of history for their antipathy to the gospel of Jesus Christ than the religious Jews? Isn't this how God works to magnify his mercy by showing mercy to the last people you'd expect? To have the very people who hated the gospel now believing it? Surprise!

This is how God works. I read Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this and it's brilliant,

"From your point of view as you hear and embrace the good news of the Message, it looks like the Jews are God's enemies. But looked at from the long-range perspective of God's overall purpose, they remain God's oldest friends...There was a time not so long ago when you were on the outs with God. But then the Jews slammed the door on him and things opened up for you. Now they are on the outs. But with the door held wide open for you, they have a way back in. In one way or another, God makes sure that we all experience what it means to be outside so that he can personally open the door and welcome us back in."⁶ (The Message)

Isn't that good? God's open door of mercy to us will be the same door of mercy the Jews will walk through as well. For now, they are on the outs, but someday they will join us on the inside.

Two Applications

Are you on the outs with God?

This whole passage is describing God's mercy toward those who are on the outs with him. While not a Jew/Gentile thing for you, is it a fair description of your posture and position toward God? This could be caused by a habitual sin. Could be bitterness against God for something in your life. Could be any number of things, but you and God are on the outs. Can you see in the story of God and Israel that God has mercy for those on the outs with him? Generationally on the outs. World famously on the outs. Doesn't matter to God. He has mercy on whom he has mercy and he opens the door to you today.

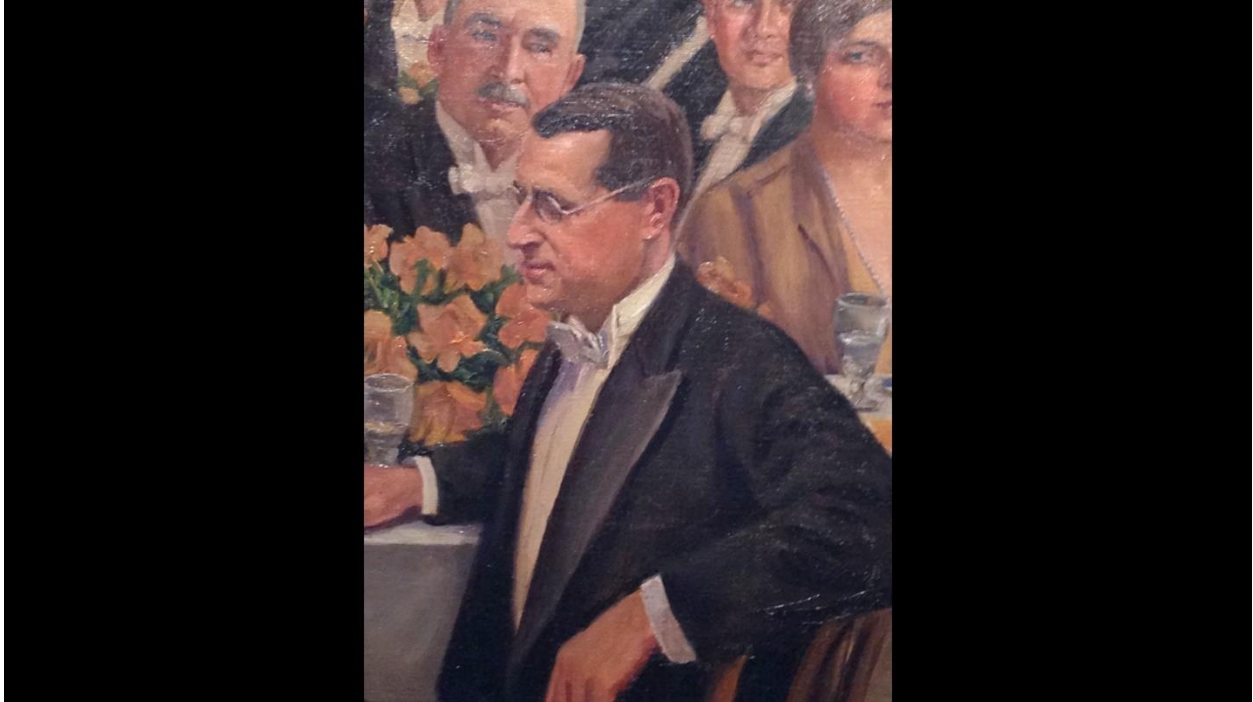
Will you step through it? Can your heart step through it? How? Mercy is something we receive. God offers it as a gift. Perhaps pray right now in your heart, *God I've lived long enough on the outs with you. Today I desire to be on the ins. I do believe Jesus died for my sins. Won't you forgive me and receive me into your salvation?*

⁵ As quoted by John Piper, "Five Reasons I Believe Romans 11:26 Means a Future Conversion for Israel," www.desiringgod.org, February 16, 2012.

⁶ E.H. Peterson, (2005). *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Rom. 11:25–32). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

This looks like that

Perhaps this message has been largely an exercise in Jewish studies for you and you've failed to connect any dot to your life.



I look at this picture (above) and I think, while painted a long time before I was born, it sure looks like me. While written a long time before you were born, Christian, can you look in the story of Israel and say, *that sure looks like me?* A hard heart. On the outs with God. Doing my thing my way. Until—surprise!—God intervened by his mercy and brought you into his salvation by his grace. All Christians should say, *this Israel story looks like my story.*

Isn't heaven going to be a lot of "me too"? How'd you get here? Mercy of God. *Me too!* What were you like before God's mercy? Hard-hearted. *Me too!* How did you come to believe? God's grace. *Me too!* What do you think of God's mercy? It is magnificent. *Me too!*

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